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ABSTRACT

A synthesis of the report, "The Current State of Assessment in Literature," (produced by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature), this digest discusses methods of evaluating students' knowledge of literature. The digest argues that, by and large, the tests that now exist in the United States do not live up to the standards set by examination systems of countries in which student achievement in literature is high. A table of data regarding state assessment of literature achievement in the 1987-1988 school year in the northeast, southeast, central, and west United States is included. (NKA)

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Testing Literature: The Current State of Affairs

by Alan C. Purves

Many who have seen Robin Williams as Mr. Keating in *Dead Poet's Society* have said that things aren't that way now.The schools don't treat literature as a set of dead facts that can be weighed and measured. Mr. Keating was a voice in the wilderness of the 1950's but things have changed now. Or have they? If you look at the tests that face today's students, you would see that Mr. Keating has been thoroughly routed from the schools. Such are the findings of a new report of the Center for The Learning and Teaching of Literature at the University at Albany, which is sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the United States Department of Education and by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The nation's testing programs devote a great deal of energy to testing reading and writing, but they fail to treat literature and cultural literacy seriously. The artistic aspects of literature and the cultural heritage of our society are not reflected in the nation's tests and as a result lead to neglect by the schools. The tests focus on literal comprehension and on the reading of prose fiction. Poetry and drama are seldom included. If literature and its artistic aspects are not made important in those tests which affect students' lives and influence teaching, no wonder that students' knowledge and appreciation are as poor as critics of the schools like E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and Allan Bloom claim they are.

State Policies

The study includes a census of the state assessment offices to find out the states' policy towards literature learning and its testing. (See Table.) Testing of learning in literature is not emphasized as a separate topic by most states, but is treated as an aspect of reading. What this means in practice is that reading assessments either include some passages from literary works in their mix of sources of texts or include a literature section as a sub-test within a reading assessment. Only two states have a humanities assessment and thus include literature as an aspect of general cultural and intellectual history. Fewer than a quarter of the states (mostly in the Northeast) measure student knowledge of specific authors and titles, literary terminology, or general cultural information, and only two of the states report that these particular measures are used to help determine promotion or graduation. Reading is important in state assessment or competence tests, but literature plays a minor role.

Content versus Knowledge

The second part of the study was an analysis of all of the published tests produced for secondary school students including those in anthology series and those used in the state assessments. The analysis covered the sorts of knowledge and skill that were measured. Most of the tests use multiple-choice questions. Almost universally, the focus of the questions is on the comprehension of content, particularly on the meaning of specific parts or of the main idea or theme of a passage which is given to the student to read. Only in college placement tests is there some emphasis on knowledge, primarily of authors and titles. As to aspects of the text other than content, there is relatively scant attention paid, and notably absent from the tests are any items dealing with such artistic characteristics of literature as language, structure, and point of view.

Typical Tests

When one turns to the critical skills demanded in these tests, a similar pattern emerges. The vast majority of the items in all tests focus on recognition and recall and on the application of knowledge to the given text. There is relatively little attempt to deal with such complex mental operations as analysis, interpretation, and generalization.

A typical test will have a two-paragraph excerpt from a novel or story and follow it with three or four questions like these fictitious examples:

- In line 10, the word rogue means: a) stranger, b) out of control, c) colored with red, d) falling apart
- The two people are: a) father and son, b) brothers, c) husband and wife, d) strangers

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- This section is about: a) the end of an adventure, b) the relationship between people and animals, c) the climax of a journey, d) the break-up of a family

Such questions hardly tap the imaginative power of fiction or drama; in fact they reduce them to the level of textbooks where the knowledge is factual. Some of the published texts go so far as to ask true or false questions like: *Huckleberry Finn is a good boy,* or *Hamlet is Mad.* As a result, students find that they do not have to read the selection; they can turn to plot summaries or simplified study guides.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, multiple-choice questions focus their attention on text comprehension at a relatively low level of understanding. They do so without clear differentiation between reading a literary selection and reading a non-literary one; any text is viewed as having content that can be easily summarized into a single main idea, point, gist, or theme. When a test includes an essay question, the level is higher. Most of the essays call for some sort of summary or critical comment, usually addressed to the content of the selection and its interpretation. There is little emphasis on form or aesthetic judgment.

By and large the tests that now exist in the United States do not live up to the standards set by the examination systems of countries in which student achievement in literature is high. There is little focus on students' abilities to penetrate a text or to use the array of cultural and literary knowledge that should have been made available to them. The power of literature to capture the imagination of the reader remains unexplored in most assessments, which treat the texts as if they were no different from articles in encyclopedias or research reports. This state of affairs is contrary to the type of approach to literature that Mr. Keating espoused.

A copy of the complete report, P. Brody, C. DeMilo, and A. C. Purves, *The Current State of Assessment in Literature* Report Series 3.1 is available from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, University at Albany, State University of New York, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222 ($7.00) and through the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, Smith Research Center, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. [ED 315 765]

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Table: State Assessments of Literature Achievement 1987-1988 School Year

How Literature is Assessed (n=number of states)	Northeast (n=11)	Southeast (n=13)	Central (n=12)	West (n=15)	Total (n=51)
As a Separate Area					
Commercial Test	0	0	0	0	0
State Developed	3	0	1	1	5
Both	0	0	0	0	0
Through Reading					
Commercial Test	3	1	4	1	9
State Developed	5	1	1	3	10
Both	0	8	1	3	12
Through Writing					
Commercial Test	0	0	0	0	0
State Developed	1	0	1	1	3
Both	0	0	0	0	0
Through Humanities					
Commercial Test	0	0	0	0	0
State Developed	2	0	0	0	2
Both	0	0	0	0	0
Total Assessing					
Literature in Any	8	10	6	7	31
Percent of States	73%	77%	50%	47%	61%

Sample was the 50 U.S. States and Washington, D.C.